

# **DEFENSE**

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### **Finally--A Real Defense Debate**

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***The Pentagon is still paying lip service to the need to transform the U.S. military; it's time for a bolder plan.***

Blue-ribbon defense commissions are often accused of treading on familiar ground in evaluating the Department of Defense's (DOD's) strategy and programs, offering up old wine in new bottles to the point where the Pentagon's brass can legitimately say, "Been there, done that." Such is not the case, however, with the new report of the National Defense Panel (NDP), an independent group convened by Congress to assess future U.S. defense requirements.

The NDP concluded that "unless we are willing to pursue a new course" from the one outlined in DOD's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), "we are likely to have forces that are ill-suited to protect our security twenty years from now." Indeed, the NDP report differs, often dramatically, from the QDR on key issues that will influence future U.S. security.

Despite its wide-ranging discussion of future challenges to our security, the QDR determined future U.S. military forces' effectiveness principally by evaluating how they will fare in a replay of the Gulf War, even though our prospective adversaries have strong incentives to avoid fighting us the way the Iraqis did.

By contrast, the NDP argues that the challenges to our security will change dramatically, and perhaps radically, over the next decade or two. The U.S. military will lose the near-monopolies it enjoyed during the Gulf War in long-range precision strike weapons as well as in the ability to use satellites to plot the movement of forces and to target them. This and the diffusion of ballistic and cruise missile technology will allow future adversaries to hold our forward bases, ports, airfields, and large supply dumps at risk, invalidating the way in which we traditionally have projected power into a threatened region. Under such circumstances, how will we move our heavy armored divisions through ports? How will we deploy our short-range tactical air forces to forward air bases? How will we even move our carriers, with their crews of 5,000, through critical choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz?

The QDR not only orients U.S. force capabilities on refighting Desert Storm, it argues that we must be prepared to do so in two regions at the same time. Failing that, it notes ominously if incongruously that "our standing as a global power . . . would be called into question."

What the NDP report calls into question is the two-war standard. To be sure, the report notes that there are threats in the Gulf and Korea that must be considered. However, neither offers a replay of the Gulf War. Iraq is far weaker than it was in 1991; Iran is not attempting to resurrect its version of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard tank forces for Desert Storm II; and North Korea is emphasizing the kind of new challenge that we will see more of: large numbers of missiles, combined with chemical and perhaps biological weapons, designed to deny the United States the use of forward bases. Put another way, the Pentagon is spending billions of dollars trying to maintain and modernize a force that will decline in value during the next decade. As the report says, the two-war standard "is fast becoming an inhibitor to reaching the capabilities we will need" to meet the new challenges to regional security.

It is in the debate about how the military will be transformed in the coming years that one finds the smoking gun showing the clear differences between the QDR and the NDP report. Much of the QDR is devoted to paying lip service to the need to exploit rapidly advancing technologies that are stimulating a "revolution in military affairs."

But when it comes time to put its money where its mouth is, DOD opts to "transform" the U.S. military by following an in-kind replacement modernization strategy dominated by Cold War-era legacy weapon systems that crowd out investment in innovative equipment that could help our military meet tomorrow's challenges.

Why, asked the NDP, are we upgrading our heavy equipment such as tanks and artillery when we may not be able to deploy them rapidly or at all, because of the growing risk to forward bases?

Why are we committing some \$300 billion to replace our short-range tactical air fleet when it is not clear how we can defend their forward bases from large-scale missile attack?

Why are we canceling plans to build the semi-stealthy arsenal ship, which at a cost of \$500 million and with a crew of only 50, could launch 500 long-range precision-guided munitions at 500 different targets, at the same time that we are scouring the budget for an extra \$5 billion to build yet another aircraft carrier, whose high signature and short-legged aircraft mean that its crew of 5,000 will be exposed to ever greater risk in future operations?

The NDP report argues that meeting tomorrow's challenges will require forces that, among other things, place far greater emphasis on stealth, mobility, and electronic defenses than on physical protection such as armor plating. These forces will rely more heavily on operating in a dispersed fashion and on fighting at extended ranges. For this reason, future forces also will rely more heavily on longer-range aircraft and other systems. With "iron mountains" of supplies and major bases increasingly vulnerable to destruction, forces will not only have to operate in a dispersed manner, but they will require a distributed supply network as well.

But how does one determine what kinds of forces will best enable us to meet tomorrow's challenges? The NDP report mandates a vigorous long-term series of joint field exercises involving all military services to identify the new military systems that will be needed, the old military systems that are depreciating in value, and the new kinds of operations our forces must master to surmount the emerging challenges to our security. Here again the QDR talks the talk of exploiting the military revolution and transforming the U.S. military but fails to walk the walk. Although the Pentagon voices support for joint exercises, the QDR actually scales them back. Indeed, the General Accounting Office reported of one exercise that "60 percent of the exercise involved only a single service, and should not be characterized as joint." Revealingly, a discouraged Congress has cut \$76 million from the joint exercise budget.

In providing a vision of very different challenges in our future, the very different kind of military we will need to cope with them, and the need for a true "transformation" strategy, the NDP has provided its congressional creators with what they have been seeking since the Cold War's end: the opportunity for a real debate over defense priorities. It is an opportunity we should seize.

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